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SUBJECT: TRANSPORTATION UNION ANNOUNCES PLANS FOR
COUNTRY-WIDE STRIKE

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: The National Center for Unified Transit Workers (CNTU) has announced plans for marches and strikes on November 4 and 7 (during and after a three-day weekend) and an extended strike on November 16-17. CNTU leader Ramon Perez Figuereo predicts more than 30,000 of his union's members will participate. At issue are economic grievances, especially the announcement that from February, 2007 the transport sector will no longer have access to bottled propane gas at the same subsidized rate as households. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) The National Center for Unified Transit Workers (CNTU) is vigorously promoting marches and strikes ostensibly to protest economic hardships, spurred on additionally by the announcement this week by Technical Secretary of the Presidency Temistocles Montas that as part of the letter of agreement with the International Monetary Fund, from February 2007 the authorities will limit the ccess of the transport sector to subsidized propane gas.

¶3. (U) The CNTU is the second-largest transportation workers' union in the Dominican Republic, with a stated membership of around 45,000. CNTU leader Ramon Perez Figuereo told poloff on November 3 that the CNTU regularly coordinates with other unions and organizations, including CONATRA, the country's largest transportation union.

¶4. (U) In an October 4 national assembly, the CNTU voted to organize marches on Sunday, November 5 and Tuesday, November 7, flanking a national holiday on Monday. The organizers plan a series of strikes beginning on November 16. As currently conceived, the events will protest: 1) the packet of "negative measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund"; 2) the country's electricity crisis and the frequent blackouts it produces; 3) the elimination of the government subsidies for liquefied natural gas, which they say will force a hike in transportation fares; 4) tax increases to be implemented before the end of the year; and a variety of other government actions seen as hurting the interests of the poor.

¶5. (SBU) Perez Figuereo predicts that more than 30,000 of his organization's members will participate. Strikes are scheduled to last at least two days, he said, but they could last longer. He predicted that strikers would block the country's major streets and thoroughfares, effectively paralyzing traffic and bringing the country to a standstill. Poloff asked whether the CNTU had received a permit for the activities; Perez Figuereo responded that they had notified the government of their plans, which was all he believed they needed to do.

¶6. (SBU) Figuereo said that CONATRA, the country's largest transportation workers' union, was "100 percent" behind his organization and would be participating in the strike alongside mre than 60 other unions and organizations.

FALPO a leftist organization popular in poor Santiagoneighborhoods, was one of the partner organization he named.

FALPO is infamous in its Santiago protests for blocking streets and sparking violent confrontations with police (most recently in March of this year). FALPO provocations have led to fatalities in the past.

¶7. (U) Next Tuesday's protest, staged to draw attention to the November 16 strikes, will involve an undetermined number of individuals. Figueroa predicted hundreds would attend. They will march and ride horses from Villa Milla in northern Santo Domingo to the presidential palace. Embassy sources suggest that marchers will include members of opposition political parties the PRD and PRSC, as well as neighborhood or leftist organizations such as FALPO.

¶8. (SBU) The PRD has not yet publicly supported the November 16 strikes, but they at least support the strikers' objectives and met with organizers as recently as this morning. The PRSC publicly supports the strikers and may have given them financial assistance.

¶9. (SBU) Figueroa offered that President Fernandez could still avoid the strikes by initiating a dialogue with a group of five senior organizers led by Figueroa himself. He suggested that this could be a healthy culmination to the Sunday march.

¶10. (U) Figueroa stressed that the strikes are not/not directed at the U.S. Government but are instead a purely domestic issue. Even so, he could not rule out the possibility that some of the groups participating would protest issues like free trade and DR-CAFTA.

¶11. (SBU) The Embassy Emergency Action Committee met on November 3 to assess information and take appropriate measures.
HERTELL